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FRANCIS THOMPSON

By Wilfrid Scawen Blunt

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FRANCIS THOMPSON

DIED AT DAWN, NOV. 13th, 1907, AGED 48 YEARS.

No tocarán campanas cuando yo muera.

Que la muerte de un triste poco suena!

Let not a bell be rung when I am dying.

The death of one so sad should make small sound.

This old fragment of Spanish verse forced itself into my mind with the dull insistence of a bell tolling in a populous street, when I received a message yesterday that Francis Thompson's life of pain was over. No one, surely, ever had so sad a life as he, so remote from all that makes the joy of life, lawful or unlawful—no one, at least, for whom the bells of fame have been asked to toll—not Keats, not Chatterton, not Poe! Yet toll they will for him, and with good cause, to-morrow, for a spirit of the very elect among us, a poet among our poets has passed away.

I do not propose to speak of his poetry here, though that was all his value to the living world. He had hardly a friend. He was of use to none, not even to himself. For ten years before his death he had poetically almost ceased to be, and his life may be said to have

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ended, except for suffering, from the day his last line of verse was written. Since then his occasional reviews in the "Academy" or the "Athenæum" were mostly unsigned and made little stir. They had been written to supply his daily needs—from no exuberance of thought. During those ten years he was dying slowly of the dread consolation which had become to him a necessity, and which he could not forego.

I do not know to what an extent the history of Thompson's life is known. It was my privilege to see him frequently during the concluding two months of his martyrdom, and to get glimpses, precious now, of what his past experience had been. It was a turbid recollection, like the surface of a stagnant stream marred in its surroundings, and with hardly here and there a gleam of colour or of light. Poor, frail spirit, in a body terrible in its emaciation, a mere shred of humanity fading visibly into the eternal shadow! As he moved among us, or lay silent in his dreams, his face might have been that of some Spanish Saint of the days of Ysabel the Catholic, tortured to inanition by his own austerities; or again it might—so small it was—have been that of a prematurely aged and dying child. Yet there were shades less deep than the rest. Now and again he would talk to me alone, and show me something of what his mind had been, if it was nothing now. I will try to rescue, while I can, from the murder of oblivion, such few poor flowers of memory as I found blossoming there, flowers still tenderly rooted in his poet's mind.

There were two thoughts, I think, that consoled him for a life so terribly without material pleasure, so steeped

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in physical suffering, so void of temporal happiness. The first was that, in spite of all, he had achieved his dream of writing things which had a chance to live. His suffering had been the price he had paid for it, but it had not been wholly paid in vain. Without it he hardly could have touched the stronger chords of feeling which had moved the world, fashion as he might the phrases of his verse, and pile, as he knew how, image on image, fancy on fancy, in his elaborate odes. Of the composition of these he spoke as a work to him of infinite labour, a labour indeed of love, but not for that less real. He knew that poetry, like every other art, was only perfected through toil. But there was something more needed to touch men's hearts, and that was bred of pain. This thought was a consolation for his joyless days. The other consolation was his trust in a life to come, with larger possibilities. Thompson was essentially a believing poet, one who had preserved the Catholic tradition of his youth untouched on fundamental matters by the modernism of our day. So, at least, he expressed himself to me, though for the ordinary formalities of religion I think he had small reverence. The soul's immortality was to him a truth unquestionable; and how should it have been otherwise, seeing to how frail, how ineffectual a body, his own was joined?

Of his early Catholic training at Ushaw, and his subsequent connection, as an inmate, with more than one monastic institution, we, of course, spoke. His father, a doctor in Lancashire, had joined the Catholic Church at the time of the Tractarian movement, and so he had been from birth a Catholic. This gave a special colouring to

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his life ; and there is nothing more distinctive in his verse than its echoes of the Catholic ritual. At Ushaw, an old-fashioned school, half seminary, in the north of England, he received with his religious training the sound classical education which also is so visible in his style. His knowledge of the best literature was wide, and his memory for books read in youth very remarkable. Thus he began life intellectually well equipped, and the circumstances served him alike for such success as he achieved, and for his greater suffering.

The story of his quarrel with his father, of his life as an outcast in the streets of London, of his rescue from the lowest depths of the submerged at the hand of one to whom he owed his intellectual rebirth, of his clean, pure life of poetic production with the Premonstratensians of Storrington, and later with the Capuchins of Pantasaph and Crawley, is, I believe, in its general outline not unknown.

Though reticent on many points, Thompson threw much valuable light for me on incidents which will some day be of use to his biographers. He was especially insistent in assuring me that in the quarrel which led to his leaving his home, it was himself, and not his father, who was most to blame. Medicine, as being his father's profession, and eminently respectable, was decided upon for him. He attended the anatomical classes at Owens College, but their horrors repelled him, and though he partially overcame his repulsion, he never could endure the sight of flowing blood. Silent and uncommunicative as he always was, he left his father ignorant of this.

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Instead of telling him, he chose to play the truant and spend his time in the public libraries, where he could follow his own bent of literary ambition.

"As a boy of seventeen," he told me, "I was incredibly vain. It makes me blush now to remember what I thought of myself. Neither my father nor my mother had the least suspicion that I was devoured by the ambition to be a great writer. All my medical studies were wasted, because I would not work, but ran off from my classes to the libraries. If my father had known it, he would not have forced me to go on. Then I failed in my examinations, and having failed, I let myself go, and took to my own ways. I was in every sense an unsatisfactory son." He was so insistent with me on this point of justifying his father in the quarrel that followed between them, that I think he would not wish it unrecorded. Although after their final quarrel he was cast off almost entirely, he clung to the recollection that, three months before his father died, they had met again at Pantasaph, and that his father had been then "entirely kind."

Of his life in the London streets, where for five years he starved, he did not like to talk. I gathered from him that at first his father gave him a small allowance of a few shillings a week, and put him in the way of getting business employment, but that, finding that he failed repeatedly to keep his situations, he finally withdrew all help and left him to his fate. From a business point of view, the poor poet must have always been a hopeless failure, a thankless subject to befriend, for he was utterly lacking in every quality that commands success, even in

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the power of applying himself consecutively to the work he loved. As it was, he drifted down the stream of life in London almost without an effort, and by the end of his second year there, in spite of what we know was in his brain of literary power for verse or prose, he had become a mere waif upon the streets, the most pitiful of the destitute poor—an educated man submerged. Work with his hands he could not do. "For that," he told me, pathetically, pointing to his poor, weak arms, no stronger than a child's, "I was physically unfit." All he could do was to earn the few daily pence he needed by such half mendicancy as the English law allows, the sale of matches in the streets, attendance at theatre doors at night as a caller of cabs and casual messenger. He needed about elevenpence a day to live, and when this was won his daily, or rather his nightly, work was over, and he retired to rest under Covent Garden arches, or on the waste ground hard by, where the refuse of the great market is thrown. He had no other lodging. What wonder, then, that he took habitual refuge from the cold and wet of those unhoused hours, waiting the policeman's order to "move on," in the drugs which his medical training gave him a knowledge of and helped him to procure.

His rescue from this depth of misery was as dramatic as anything in the history of literature. I do not owe my knowledge of its details to himself, but to a source almost as direct. He had been five years thus in the streets when he made up his mind like Chatterton to die. From time to time through all that period he had tried to get an entrance into the literary heaven of print by addressing

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publishers and editors with specimens of his verse and prose, written for the most part on scraps of paper gathered from the gutters, and always in vain. No favourable answer ever had been returned to him. Among others, he had addressed the then editor of the Catholic magazine "Merry England," sending him, with some verses, an essay treating of "Paganism Old and New." It had reached the editor wrapped in a dirty envelope, and the subject of it being unattractive it had been put aside in a pigeon-hole unread, nor was it till some weeks afterwards that, finding himself in want of material for his magazine, the editor took it down and examined it. He then found it to be full of originality, and with a wealth of illustration and quotation quite unusual in such contributions. The verses, too, were of such excellence that they betokened discovery—perhaps of a true poet. They were signed "Francis Thompson, P.O. Charing Cross." The essay and a poem were, therefore, published with his name, but when it came to forwarding payment for them the author proved undiscoverable. He was no longer to be found at the address given. Meanwhile, Thompson had yielded to despair, and, knowing that death was upon him, he saved up all the pence he could earn, and devoted them to the purchase of a single dose of laudanum sufficient to assuage the end of his troubles. With this he retired at night to his haunt, the rubbish plot in Covent Garden Market, prepared for death. Then, by his own narrative, the following incident occurred. He had already taken half the fatal draught when he felt a hand upon his arm, and looking up saw one whom he recognised as Chatterton forbidding him to drink the rest, and at

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the same instant memory came to him of how, after that poet's suicide, a letter had been delivered at his lodgings which, if he had waited another day, would have brought him the relief needed. And so with Thompson it happened ; for, after infinite pains, the editor had that very morning traced him to the chemist's shop where the drug was sold, and relief for him was close at hand.

This was the beginning for Thompson of the new and better life. Befriended by his good Samaritan, who clothed and fed and found him lodging, first in a hospital, for he needed bodily cure, and next for his mind's health, at Storrington, he came into his intellectual inheritance and found in it salvation. There at the foot of the Sussex Downs during the next two years Thompson wrote nearly all the great poetry the world knows as his, "Love in Dian's Lap," "The Hound of Heaven," "Sister Songs," and that splendid "Ode to the Setting Sun," which is the finest of its kind since the odes of Shelley. It was the highest point he reached of life and fame, the one short period of exceeding peace, sound health and quiet happiness his soul was to know. Guarded from temptation by his Premonstratensian hosts, he was, for the first time in his town existence, to wander freely among woods and fields and flowers. From his simple country surroundings he drew his inspiration, things new to him and strange, and for that reason felt the more vividly. A short space of happiness it was, the only one he could boast of in his life, for he had cast aside his town habits, and his success was a sufficient anodyne.

But Thompson, alas ! was essentially a town-dweller,

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nursed in the grime and glare of gaslit streets, and his heart hungered for them still. The country was never his true home, nor did he ever learn to distinguish the oak from the elm, or to know the name of the commonest flowers of the field, or even of the garden. From his new paradise at Storrington he wandered back into the world of London, which was to be his doom. Twice again the friends who had first rescued him, in their untiring zeal, sought to apply the remedy which had produced such fair results. They found a home for him awhile with the Franciscan Friars at Crawley and Pantasaph, but no new blossom of happy verse resulted, and little by little his life settled down into the way of death he had chosen with hardly an effort to avert the end.

His last few weeks of peace were spent, I am glad to remember, in this immediate neighbourhood, and once more in the Sussex Weald he had learnt to love at Storrington. They were those beautiful weeks of early autumn which prolonged the summer this year well into October, and for just a little he was happy in his quiet way under the oak trees reading and sleeping, with occasional talks, the result of which last are these pages I have written. Perhaps I have said too much about so sad a life ; but I think the few who loved him will not find it so, while the many who have loved his poetry will thank me for giving them a glimpse of his tragic personality. As I think of him sitting with us under the trees I seem to hear him reciting his own verses :

*Suffer me at your leafy feast
To sit apart, a somewhat alien guest,*

Francis Thompson

*And watch your mirth,
Unsharing in the liberal laugh of Earth;
Yet with a sympathy
Begot of wholly sad and half-sweet memory—
The little sweetness making grief complete;
Faint wind of wings from hours that distant beat,
When I—I, too,
Was once, O wild companions, as are you—
Ran with such wilful feet,
Wraith of a recent day and dead,
Risen wanly overhead,
Frail, strengthless as a noon-belated moon,
Or as the glazing eyes of watery heaven,
When the sick night sinks in a deathly swoon.*

WILFRID SCAWEN BLUNT.

NEWBUILDINGS PLACE, SUSSEX.

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